

Issues of Merit

A Publication of the Office of Policy and Evaluation, U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board

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Director's Perspective

Feds Should Take Part in the Change Process

This is a time of considerable change within the Federal Government. But, then again what time hasn't been? The expectation and reality of change is built into the foundations of our Government. Elections, the relatively frequent turnover of political appointees, a continuing stream of legislative proposals, new judicial rulings, and the need to respond to changing international and domestic issues, crises, and needs all create a climate of change. Indeed, a strength of our Government is its ability to operate as well as it does within that environment.

Why, then, do so many people within or connected to Government seem to resist change? Perhaps, in part, it's due to a recognition that not all change is automatically good. And even when it's beneficial, change can be threatening and uncomfortable. This dynamic tension is certainly evident in the Federal service. Proposals to modify civil service laws, policies, and practices abound. Some of the proposals may be ill-conceived and potentially harmful, but others have the potential to be not only beneficial but even essential to the goal of a high quality, efficient and effective

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OPE Focus on the Facts

Belief: One of the results of "big government" over the years has been that as the U.S. population has grown, the number of Federal workers employed to serve the peoples' needs has grown even more. This is one reason for the current emphasis on downsizing.

Fact: By 1995 there were fewer Federal employees to serve the American public than at any time in the previous 25 years. In FY 1970 there were 14.4 Federal workers per 1000 people, and in FY 1995 there were 10.8 Federal employees per 1000 people.

Source: Budget of the United States, FY 1997

Continued Attention Needed to Protect Merit Principles

Although most Federal employees continue to believe that they have adequate protections against prohibited personnel practices such as nepotism, job discrimination, and reprisal for whistleblowing, a sizable minority of Federal workers disagrees. The results of the Board's latest survey of Federal employees reveals that of the nearly 80 percent of respondents who expressed an opinion, 27 percent believe there is only minimal protection of their right to work in an environment free from prohibited personnel practices, and another 14 percent believe they have no protection from these types of abuses. Some 60 percent of this group believe that they are ad-

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Director's Perspective (continued)

civil service. The trick, of course, is distinguishing between the two. Any proposal that would alter fundamental merit system principles deserves critical scrutiny, but there are many other changes to current systems or practices that are probably overdue.

MSPB, through its studies and oversight responsibility, works hard at providing reliable, objective data to help policymakers develop informed

judgments about the likely impact of various civil service proposals. However, we're only one small part of the bigger picture. My advice to my colleagues in the Federal service is that they become active in the change process by helping distinguish the positive from the negative changes.

And—speaking of change—this will be my last “Director’s Column.” I will be retiring from the Federal Government at the end of this year after an extremely

fulfilling—even if occasionally frustrating—30-year career. My interest in the public service will continue as I spend time on training and development, teaching and consulting. To the many wonderful, dedicated, and hard-working Federal colleagues I leave behind, I extend my wishes for a happy and prosperous 1997 and beyond.

Evangeline W. Swift
Director
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Prohibited Practices (continued)

equately protected.

While a number of employees apparently believe that they are not sufficiently protected from prohibited personnel practices, a review of the responses to other survey items shows that, for the most part, employees do not believe they actually have been victims of this type of abuse. For example, a majority of employees do not think they have been denied a job or a benefit because of unlawful discrimination. Similar responses were obtained in our last survey of Federal employees in 1992.

Of those 1996 survey respondents who expressed an opinion, the primary problem they perceive involves competing for jobs and promotions. Almost one in five of these employees (18

percent) believe they were deliberately misled by an agency official about their right to compete for a job or promotion. Even more employees, (25 percent) said they were denied a job or promotion because a selecting official gave an unfair advantage to another applicant. Considerably fewer employees (5 percent) indicated they were influenced by an agency official to withdraw from competi-

tion for a Federal job or promotion in order to help another person's chances. Similarly, 5 percent of our respondents said they were denied a job or promotion which went instead to a relative of one of the selecting or recommending officials.

Small Increase in Political Activity

The survey also looked at Federal employees' level of involvement in politics.

| What do Federal employees believe about their experiences in competing for jobs or promotions? | |
|--|------------|
| | Percentage |
| I was deliberately misled by an agency official about my right to compete. | 18 |
| I was denied a job or promotion because a selecting official gave an unfair advantage to another applicant. | 25 |
| I was influenced by an agency official to withdraw from competition in order to help another person's chances. | 5 |
| I was denied a job or promotion that went instead to a relative of a selecting or recommending official. | 5 |

Note: Respondents selected as many choices as applied to their situations.

Source: 1996 Merit Principles Survey

In 1993 the law governing the participation of Federal employees in partisan political activities (the Hatch Act) was changed to allow Federal workers to engage in more types of political activities. Some 7 percent of survey respondents reported that they have been more active in partisan political activities since these changes were implemented.

Hatch Act revisions raised concerns about increased potential for agency officials to pressure employees to either engage in political activities or be rewarded or punished for their political leanings. From the point of view of most employees these fears have not materialized. Less than 1 percent of our respondents said that they have been pressured to engage in partisan political activity since the Hatch Act changes, and less than 2 percent said that they have been pressured to retaliate against or take an action in favor of another Federal employee or applicant for political reasons. The Board will continue to monitor these issues in future surveys.

Hispanic Representation in Civil Service Threatened by Base Closing

About one of every eight Hispanics in the Federal civil service today works in metropolitan San Antonio. This fact

has a number of implications for the Federal Government's efforts to maintain a diverse workforce, among them that any loss of Federal jobs in San Antonio will have an inordinate impact on the percentage of Hispanics Governmentwide. And the likelihood of job cuts in San Antonio is very real.

San Antonio's Kelly Air Force Base, which employs over 6,500 Hispanics will be closed by 2001 as part of the Defense Department's downsizing and privatization initiatives. This base closure has enormous potential to reduce the representation of Hispanics, civil service wide. Right now, Kelly has just over 6 percent of *all* the Hispanics in the Federal civil service.

For Federal agencies, the reduction of civil service jobs in metropolitan San Antonio suggests the need to increase recruitment of Hispanics for jobs in other locales to meet the Federal Government's stated policy goal of achieving full representation of Hispanics in its workforce. The Office of Personnel Management calculates that at the end of fiscal year 1995 Hispanics occupied 5.9 percent of full-time permanent civil service jobs, although they make up 10.2 percent of the civilian labor force in the United States. This means that Hispanics are the only minority group not fully represented in the Federal workforce.

Our analysis of the Federal civil service workforce over the period from 1990 to 1995 reveals that Federal agencies are increasing the number of Hispanic employees in their workforce, both in absolute numbers and as a percentage of the workforce. However, the representation of Hispanics in the civilian labor force is growing at a faster rate.

An upcoming MSPB report on this subject will detail the barriers to full Hispanic representation being faced by Federal agencies (for example, the declining number of Federal jobs, the growing proportion of Federal jobs that require higher education, and the geographic distribution of the jobs). The report will examine the availability and prevalence of merit-based strategies for contending with these barriers, and will look at the Government's current efforts to recruit Hispanics.

Before You Do Your Own Survey . . .

In evaluating human resources management issues, MSPB's Office of Policy and Evaluation has found survey questionnaires to be a rich source of information on employees' experiences and opinions. Our years of experience with survey design and administration (including our consultative work with major departments and agencies) have led to

our conviction that the most difficult and time-consuming (and possibly important) part of conducting a survey is the work done before we even send it out. The quality of the information derived from a survey questionnaire depends a great deal on the time and effort put into these up-front tasks—that is, deciding what type of survey to administer, what questions you should ask, how you should ask them, and who should be asked.

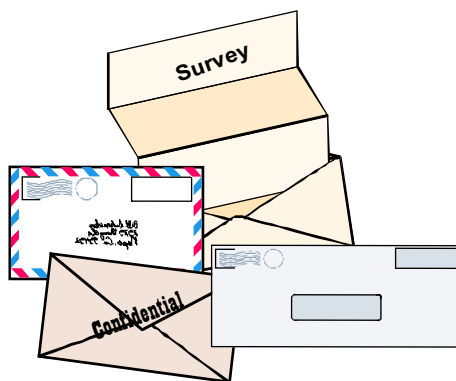
Over the years, many agencies (within and outside the Federal Government) have contacted us for advice about conducting surveys of their own. In this and subsequent *Issues of Merit* we would like to share some of the survey tips we have provided agencies, focusing on those up-front tasks.

The first step in the process is, of course, to define the issue (or issues) that you want to investigate. Then you should decide who your participants will be. For example, if you want to see how downsizing has affected the morale of your workforce, it is likely that your participants will be a sample of your current employees. Once you have decided on the topic and the participants, you must select a method for collecting the survey data.

There are several different types of surveys that agencies might consider. Some of the approaches we have used include the

following: (1) Mail-based surveys, in which printed questionnaires are mailed (either to work addresses or home addresses); (2) Telephone surveys, in which survey participants are asked a standard set of questions over the telephone; (3) Faxed surveys, similar to short, mail-based surveys, which are transmitted to participants (and returned) via fax, and; (4) Face-to-face interviews.

There are advantages and disadvantages to each approach, and the ap-



proach you select will depend on a number of factors. For example, what kind of questions do you want to ask? (A long set of questions or fairly complex questions are better suited to mail-based surveys than phone interviews.) How quickly do you need the information? (Face-to-face, telephone, and faxed surveys are typically much faster to conduct than mail-based surveys for which you have to allow time to get the survey to the participant, time for the participant to fill it out, and time for the survey to get back to you.) What resources are available to you? (Mail-based surveys

and faxed surveys can be less expensive than face-to-face interviews or telephone surveys, but you need to have accurate addresses and fax numbers for your targeted group in order to ensure an adequate number of responses; also, to conduct face-to-face interviews and telephone surveys, you need well-trained interviewers who won't unintentionally bias the responses).

Once you have selected the method (or methods—if you decide to use several to fulfill your information-gathering requirements) that best fits your needs, the next step is to develop the items for your survey. It is especially important in this step to carefully consider how the information you want to collect will be broken down. How the information will be broken down drives not only the specific groups of individuals you must send the survey to, but also the questions that you'll need to include on the survey.

For example, suppose you were looking at the issue of how downsizing has affected the morale of your workforce. Is it possible that, once you have your data, you might be interested in knowing whether employees at different grade levels are having different experiences as a result of the downsizing? You wouldn't be able to answer this question, unless you had included enough individuals from each of the various grade levels to make such a

comparison. Our general rule of thumb is that if you intend to compare groups with one another, at least 250-300 people per group must respond to your survey to make the comparison meaningful. You also need to ensure that you have a way of distinguishing your respondents on this particular characteristic. For example, you could ask them their grade level as one of the survey questions, or precode the responses according to some prior information that you have about the participant. In our survey work, we generally do not rely on precoding information because (1) it is often difficult to obtain reliable information about potential respondents, and (2) we find that we have much better response rates when respondents are confident that the surveys are anonymous and confidential, —and precoding the surveys tends to arouse suspicions in respondents.

Next time we'll discuss some general guidelines for the content of your survey questionnaire.

The Evolving Notion of a “Representative” Workforce

When the Civil Service Reform Act passed in 1978, it began with the statement that “It is the policy of the United States...to provide the people of the United States with a competent, honest,

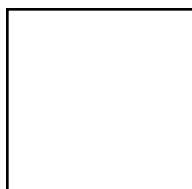
and productive Federal workforce reflective of the Nation’s diversity.” That the civil service should be diverse was emphasized again in the first of the nine “merit system principles” enumerated by the Act: “Recruitment should be from qualified individuals from appropriate sources in an endeavor to achieve a work force from all segments of society...” Moreover, Section 310 of the Act assigned to the Office of Personnel Management the development of a minority recruitment program designed to eliminate the underrepresentation of minorities (including women) at all grade levels within all occupations. Thus, with passage of the Civil Service Reform Act it was clear that, for the first time, the Government was committed to taking proactive measures to achieve a workforce that was representative of the American population in terms of race, national origin, and sex.

What was not new in this legislation, however, was the notion that the civil service should “represent” someone. The idea that the federal bureaucracy is a political body that has a “representative” role actually dates back to the early years of the republic when Thomas Jefferson sought to ensure that the percentage of Federalists and Republicans in the government reflected their percentage in the nation as a whole. Andrew Jackson went a

step further, seeking to ensure the civil service was representative of the “common man” and not just the domain of the aristocracy which, in his view, it had become. The Civil Service (Pendleton) Act in 1883 envisioned geographic representation, calling for civil service jobs to be “apportioned among the several States and Territories and the District of Columbia on the basis of population.”

Today there are important reasons for ensuring the Government is representative of the nation in terms of race, national origin, and sex, just as it was important for the Government in past eras to signal, through its hiring practices, that it was open to the participation of other groups. A widely diverse civil service—hired and advanced on merit—helps to ensure that a wider diversity of views and experiences are considered in developing and implementing Government programs, thus producing better results. But a representative Government also serves a symbolic role in a country in which equal opportunity was once denied to people based on their sex, race, or national origin. Such a Government assures through its own actions that it takes seriously the equal opportunity laws it is required to enforce, and that the opportunity to enter and advance into senior policymaking positions is open to all well-qualified people.

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"Issues of Merit" provides findings and recommendations drawn from MSPB research on topics and issues relevant to the effective operation of the Federal merit systems and the significant actions of the Office of Personnel Management.